

12-1-2014

## Partnering for Best Practice: Grade 2-4 Teachers and a University Professor Collaborate for Success

Shawn Watkins  
*East Stroudsburg University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jcre>



Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Watkins, Shawn (2014) "Partnering for Best Practice: Grade 2-4 Teachers and a University Professor Collaborate for Success," *Journal of Contemporary Research in Education*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 7.  
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jcre/vol3/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education, School of at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Contemporary Research in Education by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

**Shawn Watkins**

*East Stroudsburg University*

### **Abstract**

This article describes a partnership between a university literacy consultant and elementary educators in grades 2-4 to implement small group reading instruction during teachers' literacy block. Further, I discuss the process and outcomes of our efforts: research based instructional approaches, the importance of collaboration between K-12 schools and higher education, data and findings, and the future paths of our partnership.

As reading teachers, our enduring goal is best practice: knowing how to teach, understanding students' needs, and using the latest in research-based instructional techniques. As a literacy consultant, best practice was the foundation of my experience while working with elementary teachers. Specifically, the best practice implemented in this professional development was the integration of small group reading instruction. Research shows that students benefit from small group instruction. The small-group, differentiated reading model considers research-based strategies and enables teachers to focus on specific skills needed by varied groups of children (Tyner, 2009). Believing that learning takes place on two levels: the "actual developmental level" and the "potential developmental level," Vygotsky (1978) presented the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

### **Meet the Partners**

My partnership with this rural school district began in August 2012 with an invitation to collaborate with teachers of literacy. Located in northeastern Pennsylvania, the district accommodates nearly 900 students across four buildings.

Together, we decided the goal to improve literacy would be best met by further developing the teachers' knowledge of best practices in literacy. Additionally, the teachers would need the support as they try new techniques in a variety of instructional settings.

### **Beginning the Journey: Pre-Assessment**

In order to gain an understanding about teachers' current literacy needs and target possible instructional gaps, I met with the teachers in a staff development meeting before the start of the school year. The professional development meeting totaled 150 participants, including the district's K-4 teachers, instructional specialists, and administrators. Following a brief introduction, we organized the teachers by school and grade level. It was our goal to determine the strengths and needs of the teachers' literacy instruction. They were asked to display the elements of their literacy block on a large poster for presentation. They used two guiding questions to accomplish this:

- What does literacy instruction look like in your classroom?

- What are the students and the teacher doing during the 90-minute literacy block? After displaying their posters on the wall, teachers engaged in a gallery walk to compare their literacy block to other classes and grade levels. Conversations started as they compared their instructional techniques to those in other classes.

Next, teachers were asked to respond in writing to two questions:

- What works well during your literacy block?
- What would you like to improve during your literacy block?

The teachers appeared to put some thought into their written responses, and most were eager to share their ideas. See pie charts A and B for the breakdown in responses. Our third form of pre-assessment was conducted through classroom visits in grades 2-4. During our visits, teachers were not given anything specific to demonstrate but instead, asked to teach their literacy lessons as scheduled.

These three forms of pre-assessment were helpful in giving us insight into the needs of teachers and students. Additionally, sharing across grade levels and schools unified the teachers as learners in the endeavor to try new instructional routines. After reflecting on this day of professional development and debriefing with the principals, I decided to work with the teachers in grades 2-4 for one year. This would give us a more manageable learning community consisting of 24 teachers, 4 reading specialists, and 2 principals.

### The Baseline Data

The posters that portrayed the teachers' literacy blocks and their written responses suggested an imbalance in the teaching and learning of literacy. It was evident that small group reading instruction was missing from

most of the teachers' daily literacy instruction. The posters also presented a clear absence of instructional routines and grouping methods that typically serve as the foundation for differentiating literacy instruction. Information obtained from the K-1 written responses indicated that improvement was needed with *literacy centers, guided reading, differentiating instruction, and writers' workshop*. Areas that needed improvement in grades 2-4 reflected *differentiating instruction, centers, writing, using leveled readers, partner reading, and readers' workshop*. Charts A and B indicate the areas of needed improvement and the percentages based on teachers' responses. The most common responses included centers, guided reading, and differentiating instruction. The "other" category indicated on the pie charts included various individual responses that did not necessarily pertain to literacy such as behavior management, more parental support, and more time for literacy block.

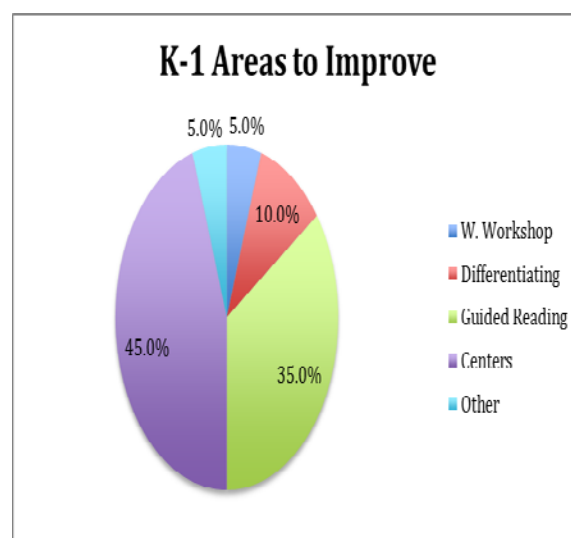


Chart A

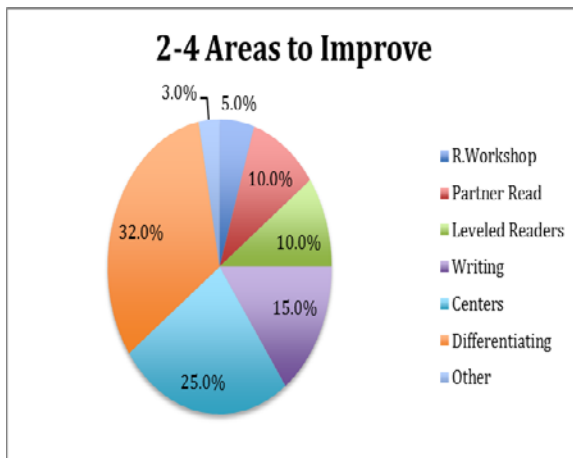


Chart B

The observations made during the classroom visits revealed whole group instruction – Round Robin Reading being the most common approach as the main, if not the only, form of literacy instruction.

### But, Whole Group Instruction is So Much Easier!

Whether relying on whole-group instruction is due to time constraints, classroom management, familiarity, or a quieter classroom, it is not the best format for meeting students' individual needs during the "heart" of reading instruction. Whole-group lessons are often too challenging for struggling learners and too easy for proficient literacy learners (Williams, Phillips-Birdsong, Hufnagel, Hungler, & Lundstrom, 2009). Students who represent these types of learners often fail to pay attention to the task at hand because they are frustrated, bored, or even distracted (Ash, Kuhn, & Walpole, 2009). Without a doubt, whole group reading instruction can be beneficial when engaging in read-alouds, introductions and skill review; however, small groups are essential in scaffolding individual students' understanding.

In *Good-bye Round Robin*, Opitz and Rasinski (2008) clearly outline the problems

with this specific form of whole group oral reading instruction. When students are called upon to read one after the other, reading comprehension is hindered. Often students fail to pause and think about what they are reading, if they can even read the text! Instead, they are reading ahead, lagging behind, or poking fun of the student who is struggling. For these reasons, the implementation of guided reading and learning centers were suggested to our elementary teachers. It is critical that we match instruction to students' literacy needs.

The guided reading instruction that teachers implement in their classrooms aligns with what we know: children learn best when they are guided by a more knowledgeable person or can collaborate with others. While teachers work with their small groups, the other students are actively engaged in literacy activities, rotating through centers. Learning centers provide students with the opportunities to work independently, with partners, and small groups as they practice different literacy skills. Additionally, the centers encourage students to make choices and take responsibility of their own learning. Jensen (2005) explains that students are more motivated when they are given choices and engaged in relevant, meaningful learning.

### The Process Begins

To begin the implementation of small group literacy instruction in grades 2-4, I met with the principals to discuss our plan. Additionally, I met with reading specialists, and one *model* teacher from each grade level.

We shared salient findings in the data collection, and aligned them with the principals' goals to increase student achievement in literacy. As we discussed the importance of small group reading instruction, we considered its implementation during reading/language arts in addition to the teachers' 30-minute intervention block that is set-aside for Response to Intervention & Instruction (RTII). Together, we decided that small group literacy instruction would be implemented as guided reading and

literacy centers would be implemented in model classrooms first.

In choosing a model teacher, we considered teachers who were positive, flexible, and open to trying new techniques. Model teachers took the initiative in "rolling out" our instructional plan. First, they were given 10 school days to look through the resources, collaborate online with us to address questions or concerns, and make the necessary instructional adjustments in their classrooms for guided reading and literacy centers. Once they were comfortable enough with guiding a small reading group, we invited other teachers to watch their instruction.

While some teachers were familiar with guided reading, the majority of them were not comfortable with the technique. In order to scaffold their understanding, we talked about using instructional texts on students' levels, available materials, parts of a guided reading lesson, and management. As we discussed managing the classroom during guided reading, we explained the practice of literacy centers. We shared handouts, books, and videos on guided reading and also provided guided reading demonstrations for them. Even though we worked directly with model teachers in the beginning, all teachers had access to the resources and were encouraged to engage their students in guided reading and literacy centers. When discussing materials for reading instruction, teachers decided to use books from their adopted Houghton Mifflin Reading Series and leveled readers from Reading A-Z.

In the ensuing weeks, teachers progressed toward organizing their classrooms for the "new" instruction. Moreover, the instructional inquiry continued through two forms of communication: Email discussions, which the teachers would often initiate about such topics as managing centers, grouping, and promoting independent learners, and padlet.com, a website that provides users with a wall in which one posts thoughts and ideas related to any topic. The collaborative website allows members to read each other's posts and comment instantaneously. About once a week, I

would post open-ended questions asking teachers to reflect on videos or shared readings. For example, I posted two videos on guided reading workstations to the wall on padlet.com. Additionally, I posed the following questions on the wall:

- What do you notice about the process for rolling out a new workstation?
- What really catches your attention in the videos? What do you want to remember?
- Have you tried something similar? If so, what worked, and what did not work?

I would frequently check the wall and encourage responders to think deeper about their ideas, or offer suggestions to their peers if they had a question. These digital sources gave us the opportunity to extend our conversations outside of school hours, and continue to learn from each other at the teachers' convenience.

Two weeks later, we visited the model teachers during their guided reading/center time to see their progress. In order to discuss and reflect on the experience, we met before class started, during their preparation or lunch times. During the summer of 2013, it was reported that a particular class of third graders (taught by a model teacher) increased their reading comprehension scores in the annual statewide assessment. This model teacher had initiated small group reading instruction early in the school year and used it regularly – meeting with the lowest readers daily.

### **Partnerships Promote Powerful Learning**

The benefits of partnerships between K-12 schools and higher education are well established (Goodlad, 1987). Some of the key factors that assist in driving a successful partnership include understanding the school's context, recognizing the benefits of the partnership, establishing trust, and designating program champions (Bosma, Sieving, Ericson, Russ, Cavender, & Bonine, 2010).

When reflecting on these experiences, I considered each of these elements and how it influenced our partnership with the elementary schools:

*Understanding the School's Context* – The principals were instrumental in sharing information about the organization and dynamics among classes, grade levels, and schools. Time spent in the schools led to an increased awareness of the school's culture, policies, resources, and conditions. This knowledge was helpful in understanding the interrelatedness and interdependence of how different facets may affect each other. For instance, knowing *how* and *when* grade levels met for instructional planning helped guide my involvement in the partnership.

*Recognizing the benefits of the partnership* - Working together with a shared goal gives us opportunities to learn from each other throughout this journey – all to better our community of learners. Each of us brings our own expertise and credibility to the partnership. The teachers specialize in knowing their students and curriculum and are ultimately the conduit for change, the reading specialists assist in best practices and literacy demonstrations, the principals make the expectations and academics clear, and the professors align research with teaching and learning. When we collaborate, we support, motivate and learn from each other in order to provide the best outcomes for our students.

*Establishing Trust* – When I was invited to discuss this literacy initiative, I visited (and still do) as an inquirer rather than an expert in leading our partnership. It was important that we work together with the shared goal of directly improving literacy teaching and learning in the elementary grades. After listening to the K-4 teachers' concerns, I provided the teachers with professional development in myriad ways. Additionally, I chose the term "visiting" throughout the experience instead of "observing." To me, observations immediately bring "intimidation" or "a more knowledgeable person watching me teach" to mind. It was never my intention to make teachers feel

uncomfortable during my visits. We learned from each other and shared a vested interest in meeting the needs of all learners.

Communication also contributed to establishing trust. I made ongoing efforts to follow up with all partners through visits, email, online message board, or phone calls.

*Designating Program Champions* – Throughout our journey, I considered everyone involved in student learning a *champion*. Principals advocated stronger literacy instruction, supported the teachers, and participated in change. In addition to working with students, reading specialists provided essential resources, strategies, and ideas for classroom teachers that supported our literacy initiative. Designated model teachers were risk-takers and leaders as they met with us to begin rolling out new ideas. Classroom teachers, although some were reluctant to change, visited the model classrooms to watch demonstrations and lessons before implementation in their own classrooms began. In order to move our literacy initiative forward, everyone is responsible for ensuring that sound, research supported instruction is taking place.

### **The Journey Continues – Paving Future Paths**

As the 24 teachers continue to use guided reading and literacy stations as the heart of instruction, it is important that they allow more than the book levels to guide the planning of instruction. Glasswell and Ford (2010) explain that we can be more flexible with text levels than we might have previously thought. In fact, instruction should be organized around areas of need. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) even suggested that students be *similar* in their development and read *about* the same level. Instead of avoiding challenging text, teachers may use this time to scaffold their understanding. Shanahan (2012) noted that while "it is great to not frustrate kids, learning comes from a certain amount of frustration" (Shanahan, 2012, Comments, para. 5). He continues to explain that teachers' role in reading groups should be more than simply observing reading behaviors. By placing

students in more difficult texts, teachers might “model, explain, encourage repetition, or isolate parts of the performance for special practice” (Shanahan, 2012, Comments, para. 5).

I will encourage teachers in third and fourth grade to facilitate students’ interactions as they group according to needs even if that means the text is slightly more challenging. I agree with Glasswell and Ford (2010) when they express the necessity of this to accelerate reading growth and promote confidence in our below-level readers.

Throughout our partnership, our aspiration has been collaboration and best practice. Now that the teachers are using multiple grouping patterns, small group reading approaches, and literacy centers, we think we are well on our way to realizing our goal.

### References

- Ash, G.E., Kuhn, M.R., & Walpole, S. (2009). Analyzing “inconsistencies” in practice: Teachers continued use of round robin reading. *Reading & Writing Quarterly* 25, 87-103.
- Fountas, I.C. & Pinnell, G.S. (1996). *Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Glasswell, K., & Ford, M. P. (2010). Teaching flexibly with leveled texts: More power for your reading block. *The Reading Teacher* 64(1), 57-60.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1987). Schools and universities can-and must-work together. *Principal* 67(1), 9-15.
- Jensen, E. (2005). *Teaching with the brain in mind*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Opitz, M.F., & Rasinski, T. (2008). *Goodbye round robin*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Shanahan, T. (2012, July 14). Common core or guided reading. Message posted to <http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2012/07/common-core-or-guided-reading.html>
- Tyner, B. (2009). *Small-group reading instruction: A differentiated teaching model for beginning and struggling readers*. Newark, DE: The International Reading Association.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes* (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, Eds. & Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, C., Phillips-Birdsong, C., Hufnagel, K., Hungler, D., & Lundstrom, R.P. (2009). Word study instruction in the K-2 classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(7), 570-578.

**Shawn Watkins** is an Associate Professor in the Reading Department at East Stroudsburg University. She works as a literacy consultant in a Northeastern Pennsylvania school district and can be reached at [swatkins1@esu.edu](mailto:swatkins1@esu.edu).